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Information and language in news impact prejudice against minorities

Researchers at the Institute of Psychology show how news about immigrants and language describing immigrants shape prejudice against immigrants and other social minorities, as part of the project «Immigrants in the Media». For instance, nouns used for describing the ethnicity of immigrants enhance prejudice against immigrants more than adjectives.

Sylvie Graf and Sabine Sczesny from the Institute of Psychology at the University of Bern are investigating how positivity or negativity of news about immigrants and language that describes immigrants in mass media shape prejudice against them. Their project [«Immigrants in the Media»](#) is funded by the European Commission. The psychologists recently published the results of three experimental studies in the journal «Media Psychology».

Positive news reduce prejudice

In the studies, the researchers examined prejudice against two negatively perceived groups – the Roma and Kosovo Albanians – and one positively perceived group – Italian immigrants. The studies were carried out in different cultural contexts – namely the Czech Republic and Switzerland. Participants in the studies read fictitious newspaper reports that described either positive (e.g., helping), negative (e.g., attacking), or mixed (e.g., helping and attacking) behaviours of immigrants. Across the studies, prejudice against the given minority group changed after having read a single report about the acts of its members. «Positive reports led to less pronounced prejudice, while negative reports led to more pronounced prejudice against the described minority group», explains Sylvie Graf. Interestingly, mixed reports that contained both positive and negative information also reduced prejudice – like the positive reports. «This suggests that including positive information into negative news may attenuate prejudice», according to Graf.

Nouns arouse prejudice more than adjectives

The fact whether a report is positive or negative is usually clear. However, news can also contain subtler cues, which shape how people view minorities. An example of such cues are the small variations in language describing the ethnicity of immigrants. A person can be either described as an 'immigrated Italian' or an 'Italian immigrant'. Previous studies have shown that information about a certain person described with a noun influences our opinion about the given person to a greater extent than the same information described by an adjective. For instance, people believed that a Catholic would attend a church more regularly than a Catholic person – despite the fact that both the noun and adjective are the same word and describe the very same thing, namely a person's religion. No study

before has systematically tested the effect of nouns and adjectives in positive versus negative texts. Graf and colleagues showed that nouns used for describing ethnicity («a saving Roma») led to more pronounced prejudice against the given ethnic group than adjectives («a Roma saviour»). «Nouns enhance existing prejudice more than adjectives, independently of the positivity or negativity of newspaper articles – even if news report on positive events», says Graf.

Publication:

Graf, S., Linhartova, P., & Sczesny, S. (2019). *The effects of news report valence and linguistic labels on prejudice against social minorities*. Media Psychology. Doi:1080/15213269.2019.1584571.
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Other publication mentioned in the text:

Carnaghi, A., Maass, A., Gresta, S., Bianchi, M., Cadinu, M., & Arcuri, L. (2008). *Nomina sunt omina: on the inductive potential of nouns and adjectives in person perception*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 94, 5, 839-859. Doi:10.1037/0022-3514.94.5.839

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